DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 127 RC 023 429

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TITLE Alternate Assessment: No Child Left Behind during Statewide Testing.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 8p.; In: No Child Left Behind: The Vital Role of Rural Schools. Annual National Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (22nd, Reno, Nevada, March 7-9, 2002); see RC 023 405.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *Accountability; *Alternative Assessment; Curriculum Based Assessment; Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; Eligibility; Severe Disabilities; *Special Education

ABSTRACT

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 clarified that special education was to fully participate in educational accountability systems related to standards-based reform. Special education students could participate in the general assessment, with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment. IDEA did not specify the content or form of alternate assessment, but required that a system for alternate assessment be in place by July 2000 and that results of alternate assessments be reported with the same frequency and in the same detail as general assessment results. Inclusion of special education students in statewide testing ensures that they remain visible in subsequent decision making about policy and resource allocation. This paper discusses issues in the development of alternate assessments: (1) its purpose as an evaluation of the educational system's performance with regard to students with severe disabilities; (2) the need for states to have broad-based, inclusive academic standards that can be linked to the functional curricula of special education; (3) eligibility criteria based on disability classification or curricular focus; (4) forms of alternate assessment (portfolio assessment, checklists or rating scales of functional skills, IEP analysis); (5) who scores alternate assessments; and (6) methods of reporting results. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND DURING STATEWIDE TESTING

Standards-based reform has swept across our nation's educational system over the past decade. On both national and state levels, data have been collected, often through wide-scale testing, to help determine the current state of our educational system, identify problems, and develop plans for continued improvement (Vanderwood, McGrew, & Ysseldyke, 1998). The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 105-17, 1997 [IDEA 97]) clarified that special education was to fully participate in these educational accountability systems. IDEA 97 mandated that all students with disabilities participate in statewide testing and that those students who are unable to participate in the general assessment system, even with appropriate accommodations, must participate through an alternate assessment. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team was given the responsibility of determining the most appropriate of the following three options: (1) the student would participate in the general assessment without accommodations; (2) the student would participate in the general assessment with accommodations; or (3) the student would complete an alternate assessment. IDEA 97 did not mandate the content or form of the alternate assessment, but required that a system for alternate assessment be in place by July 1, 2000. The Act specified that results of the alternate assessments must be reported with the same frequency and in the same detail as assessment results for students without disabilities.

Schools across the nation have responded to the call for reform by collecting data to measure progress toward educational goals. Until recently, however, results for students with disabilities were rarely included in such data collection, as these students were typically excluded from statewide testing (Vanderwood et al., 1998). Ysseldyke and Olsen (1999) emphasized the importance of the inclusion of students with disabilities in statewide assessment when they stated: "It has been argued that when students with disabilities are out of sight in assessment and accountability systems they are out of mind when policy decisions are made and when educational structures and programs are designed" (p. 175). This point was brought out as well by the title of an article by Burgess and Kennedy (1998): *What Gets Tested, Gets Taught, Who Gets Tested, Gets Taught.* Excluding students from statewide testing may also result in denying them the anticipated benefits of accountability (e.g., higher expectations, increased student performance). Thurlow, Elliott, and Ysseldyke (as cited in Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2001), discussed the impact of including/excluding students with disabilities in statewide testing. Three important arguments for including all students in the assessment process emerged from their discussion: (1) all students must be included to obtain an accurate picture of the educational system (i.e., accurate comparisons across schools, districts, and states cannot be made if some districts assess all students and some assess only a portion of their students); (2) excluding students from assessment because they are not expected to do well may lower expectations for student achievement; and, perhaps most importantly, (3) policy decisions and resource allocation may be based on the results of the assessments, and if students with disabilities are not represented in the reported results, their performance will not influence the decision-making.

It is critical that the educational needs of students with severe disabilities are not overshadowed by the needs of the much larger number of students participating in the general statewide testing. When designed and implemented to hold the educational system accountable for positive outcomes for students with disabilities, alternate assessment systems may become a powerful tool for system improvement. This paper presents a review of the progress made in the development of alternate assessments. Although states have followed different paths in creating alternate assessments, any approach must address the issues of assessment purpose, standards/content, eligibility, form, scoring, and reporting. Discussion of these issues forms the remainder of this paper.

Assessment Purpose

Alternate assessments may be used to measure student performance, system performance, or both. Kleinert, Haig, Kearns, and Kennedy (2000) noted that statewide assessment systems (including alternate assessments) may be thought of more as a matter of school accountability than of student accountability. Clearly, schools must be held

RC023429

accountable for providing the opportunities and appropriate resources for students to achieve the standards and goals upon which they are assessed. Measuring student performance is not independent from measuring system performance, as student performance informs the discussion of system performance. An alternate assessment system can be seen as a means of evaluating the degree to which the educational system is meeting the needs of students with severe disabilities (i.e., a basis for drawing conclusions about the educational system's performance). Information about each student's individual performance may be valuable in determining how well that student's needs are being addressed, and aggregated information may be helpful for decisions made on a systemic level. Analysis of the assessment results should indicate programmatic strengths and weaknesses. If, for example, the assessment includes a measure of generalization, but analysis of the assessment results indicates the students are unable to demonstrate generalization (due to lack of opportunity it appears, as all instruction took place in the special education classroom), this indicates a system weakness. The power of such assessment systems to drive improvement in educational systems would be demonstrated should such a scenario result in the school revising its instructional practices and placing a greater emphasis on generalization of skills. How states will use the results of alternate assessments remains to be seen, but the opportunity exists to develop this process into a powerful tool for system improvement.

Standards

Standards refer both to what students should know (i.e., content standards) and how well they should know it (i.e., performance standards). The instructional goals and objectives for students with severe disabilities are usually quite different from those reflected in statewide testing. General education assessment systems typically address standards in the areas of language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001). Functional goals such as dressing oneself, safely crossing the street, or using public transportation do not fit easily under such standards. However, creating a separate set of standards for students with disabilities raises the issue of creating separate educational systems (Ysseldyke, Olsen, & Thurlow, 1997). IDEA 97 made it clear that students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum, and the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-382) required that standards apply to *all* students, including those with disabilities. These Acts would seem to discourage separate standards.

In an effort to resolve the dilemma of applying high standards to all students, states have used a variety of strategies for describing the relationship between the functional curriculum accessed by students with severe disabilities and the general standards. Most states described their alternate assessments as being based on exactly the same standards as the assessments for students without disabilities (or a subset of those standards), and have expanded the standards to include functional skills as indicators (Thompson et al., 2001). Ford et al. (2001) discussed some of the problems involved in expanding the standards. They noted that general standards are typically expanded by either simplifying or redefining the existing standards. Simplifying may result in documentation of minor participation in classroom activities (e.g., citizenship standard simplified to drawing a flag), and redefining may result contrived connections to the standard (e.g., historical perspective standard redefined to using a daily schedule). Either of these approaches may lead to educators spending an inordinate amount of time connecting the functional curriculum to standards that are not truly related. The time may be better spent developing inclusive standards that take into account the functional curriculum that is necessary for these students.

Regardless of how the standards are described, the crux of the issue is that the standards that form the basis of the alternate assessments must reflect the curricular domains typically accessed by this student population (e.g., functional academic, communication, social, self-care, and vocational skills). Without this fundamental connection between the assessment and the curriculum, the assessment results will not support informed decision-making regarding how well special education programs are meeting the needs of students and what system improvements are indicated. States that have developed broad-based standards (e.g., students will use mathematical concepts to solve problems in daily life) find that they are more easily applied to students with disabilities than more narrowly defined standards (e.g., students will master algebraic functions).

Eligibility

Eligibility is the determination of which students should participate in the alternate assessment. It is expected that the majority of students with disabilities (98%) will participate in the general statewide testing, either under typical testing procedures or through the use of accommodations (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). The remaining

students (i.e., the 1-2% with severe disabilities) will participate in alternate assessments, as use of the general education tests, even with appropriate accommodations, would not yield meaningful or useful information. The students participating in alternate assessment are usually described as those having the most severe cognitive deficits or multiple disabilities (Ysseldyke & Olsen, 1999), students enrolled in self-care, life skills, or functional programs, and students not pursuing general education outcomes (Warlick & Olsen, 1999). IDEA 97 mandated that members of the IEP team (i.e., those deemed to know the student best) make the eligibility determination. It is important that alternate assessments are viewed as a valid assessment for a specific group of students and are not used to keep students, who for a variety of reasons are not expected to do well on the general assessment, from "bringing down" the general assessment results (Langenfeld, Thurlow, & Scott, 1997).

Some state guidelines regarding eligibility focus on disability classifications (e.g., severely mentally impaired, multiply impaired, autistic), while others take a curricular focus (e.g., functional or lifeskills programs) (Warlick & Olsen, 1999). Many states also list criteria *not* to be used for the eligibility decision, such as academic delays due to excessive absences, lack of instruction, social or cultural factors, disruptive behavior, or expectation of poor performance (Thompson et al., 2001). Many factors must be taken into account to determine eligibility for an alternate assessment. Using only the student's disability category, for example, may lead to students capable of taking the general assessment (e.g., some students categorized as having autism) who are instead participating in the alternate assessment, and making the determination based on the student's curriculum may overlook the possibility that the student might benefit from more access to the general curriculum. States often list several criteria, all of which must be met in order for a student to be eligible for the alternate assessment. For example, Nebraska's criteria include documentation that the student's demonstrated cognitive ability and adaptive behavior prevent completion of the general curriculum even with appropriate modifications, that the student's curriculum is primarily functional, and that he/she requires individualized instruction to acquire, maintain, and generalize skills (Hill, Bird, & Dughman, 2000).

Forms of Assessment

Assessment systems must be developed to measure progress towards the standards. General education has relied heavily on standardized achievement testing to measure student progress (Elliott, Braden, & White, 2001). As noted previously, this type of assessment does not yield useful information for students with severe disabilities. A number of different forms for alternate assessment have been selected by the states. The National Center on Educational Outcomes identified four general categories: portfolio assessment, checklist/rating scale of functional skills, IEP analysis, and other. The term portfolio is used to refer to any collection of materials and/or data for a specific student, and varies a great deal from state to state. Portfolios may consist of any combination of the following: work samples, audio and/or video clips, anecdotal records, surveys, adaptive behavior checklists, attendance reports, daily schedules, data charts, and communication systems (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001; Warlick & Olsen, 1999). In addition to measures of student performance, access to multiple settings, interaction with peers without disabilities, skill generalization, use of natural supports, and use of age-appropriate materials/activities may be measured when evaluating the portfolios (Warlick & Olsen, 1999).

A few states have created alternate assessments consisting of locally developed checklists or rating scales of functional skills, which are completed by teachers and/or IEP teams (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). Domains assessed through these checklists include functional academics, communication skills, domestic skills, and vocational skills. Checklists and rating scales are less time consuming to complete than portfolios, and could be standardized, but vary in the amount and quality of information they yield. Progress could be charted through the use of rating scales and checklists that are administered semi-annually or annually.

Five states are analyzing student IEPs as the alternate assessment. IEP goals are categorized into domains and assessed according to rate of progress and/or level of support required to achieve the goal (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). Thurlow (2000) points out that measuring only progress on IEP goals may lower expectations and lead to the conclusion that any amount of progress is acceptable. The intention of the IEP process has always been that the goals would be assessed throughout the school year, thus this method is an extension of that procedure, and it may be difficult to make any kind of comparison across students or programs given that the goals are so individualized. States categorized as "other" reported using data from eligibility assessment, out-of-level testing, and assessments conducted by the IEP team (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001).

Scoring of Assessments

Alternate assessments are scored by a variety of professionals under a variety of circumstances. States have developed systems in which teachers score the assessments of their own students, teachers score the assessments of students other than their own, state department of education staff score the assessments of all students, or a combination is employed, such as teachers and state department staff score the assessments and results are compared (Warlick & Olsen, 1999). Teachers in Kentucky found they had difficulty maintaining objectivity when scoring their own students' portfolios (Kleinert, Kearns, & Kennedy, 1997). Training for those scoring alternate assessments, scoring assessments for students of other teachers, and having more than one person score each assessment may help overcome the issue of objectivity.

Reporting

IDEA 97 requires that participation and performance results of alternate assessments be reported, but does not provide specific instruction for doing so. States are therefore left to determine the most appropriate methods of reporting results, and to make decisions about whether to aggregate the results of alternate assessments with the results of the general assessments. The issue of aggregation of results is further complicated by the performance descriptors used to summarize assessment results. General education accountability assessments are typically summarized by classifying results into descriptive categories such as mastery, near mastery, and partial mastery. Alternate assessment systems have followed this lead, however they have not always used descriptors that match those used for the general assessment in their state. Using different descriptors would make aggregation with the scores of the general assessment difficult, while using the same descriptors allows all "mastery" scores (general or alternate) to be easily combined. Using the same descriptors and equally weighting them from either the general or alternate assessment does not, however, resolve the issues (discussed below) inherent in aggregating scores from very different assessments. Of the states that have determined the descriptors, about half have chosen descriptors that are the same as those used in the general assessment, and half have chosen different descriptors (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001).

Bechard (2001) discussed the pros and cons of different models currently in use or proposed by various states to report assessment data. Aggregating the data, reporting the scores of all assessments (general and alternate) together, allows students who participate in alternate assessment to "count" as much as those who use the general assessment, and perhaps compels schools to place the same level of importance on the results of the alternate assessments as on the general assessments. However, questions of statistical soundness are raised by the aggregation of results from what may be very different types of assessments, as well as a danger of the scores of this very small part of the total group (less than two per cent) being overlooked upon aggregation. If high stakes are attached to assessment results, a district may be more inclined to put resources into improving the scores of the larger number of students using the general assessment rather than into improving the scores of students with severe disabilities, which represent less than two per cent of the total scores. In response to these issues, some states have decided to report the scores in both aggregated and disaggregated forms. That is, they will report combined results that include both assessments and also report results of each of the assessments separately. This model places equal value on both types of assessment and communicates more information overall, but does not address the issue of the appropriateness of aggregating scores from different assessments. Another approach is to keep the general and alternate assessments completely separate. This approach avoids the statistical soundness issue by not aggregating scores, but reporting such a small number of alternate assessment scores separately may cause them to be overshadowed by the results of the general assessment. Thirty states currently have a system in place to report alternate assessments; ten of these report results aggregated with general assessment scores, and twenty report alternate assessment scores separately (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). Many states are working on a process which will aggregate the scores of alternate assessments with general assessment scores, and also resolve the statistical issues such aggregation raises.

The 1997 Reauthorization of IDEA required states to develop alternate assessments that would allow even students with the most severe disabilities to participate in statewide testing. After determining eligibility for participation in the alternate assessments, states initially had to decide from what standards they would develop the assessment. Most states report expanding the general standards to include functional skills. A number of different strategies were then used to develop the alternate assessments, including portfolios (work samples, anecdotal records, videotape, etc.), checklists/rating scales, and IEP analysis. One of the least defined areas of alternate

assessment remains reporting of scores. IDEA 97 mandated reporting, but did not offer specific guidance. States that have determined a method of reporting are usually reporting alternate assessments separately from the general assessments, but are working on a process that would allow all scores to be aggregated. It will be important to monitor the process of alternate assessment development and implementation to ensure that the educational needs of students with severe disabilities are included in the overall evaluations of school effectiveness.

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